

Chapter One

Of all the religious books in the world, the Noble Qur'an is unique in that it alone professes to be *Kalam Allah*, the unadulterated 'Word of Allah', the Creator. In *Surah Al-An'am*: 7, Allah reminds us that as the Qur'an was being revealed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, it was subsequently written down on 'paper' (Arabic قرطاس), or in fact papyrus, as paper was unknown to the peoples of the Middle East in the 7th century C.E.¹

وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَاهُ عَلَيْكَ كِتَابًا فِي قِرْطَاسٍ فَلَمَسُوهُ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ لَقَالُوا الَّذِيْنَ كَفَرُوْا اِنْ هٰذَا اِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّبِيْنٌ ﴿٧﴾ الأنعام: ٧

(And even if we had sent down unto you [O Muhammad ﷺ] a Message written on paper so that they could touch it with their hands, the disbelievers would have said, 'This is nothing but obvious magic!')

During the lifetime of Abu Bakr Al-Saddiq رضي الله عنه, the first Righteous Caliph (632-634), the entire Qur'an was preserved for the first time on square sheets of papyrus. 'Uthman ibn 'Affan رضي الله عنه, the third Righteous Caliph (644-656), had several copies of the Qur'an prepared on parchment (stretched and dried animal skin) and sent to the major capitals of *Dar al-Islam* where they were preserved and copied yet again.

Over the centuries, many beautiful styles of writing the Arabic language were developed. Even today, an educated Arab is often familiar with several calligraphic styles, such as *ruq'ah*, *naskh*, and *thuluth*, etc. The Noble Qur'an continued to be hand-written on specially-prepared sheets of papyrus and parchment and -- even after the invention of the printing press in 1450 -- on paper. The first extant copy of a printed Qur'an is from Venice, Italy and dates from 1537-1538. It was mass produced for sale throughout the Ottoman Empire, but a multitude of printing errors prevented it from ever being sold.

Chinese Paper

The history of paper is fascinating and important as its manufacture in the Islamic world heralded an information explosion enabling the inexpensive copying of the Noble Qur'an and collections of *ahadith*.

Paper had its origin in China two thousand years ago. The complex process of making paper begins with the extraction of cellulose fibres from plants, such as bamboo, mulberry bark, hemp, or even cotton rags. The fibres are then beaten to a pulp in water and suspended there until a layer of the material can be skimmed off the surface and placed on a screen to dry. Unlike

¹ All dates in this book are Gregorian dates according to the Christian calendar and will not be followed by the abbreviation C.E. ('Common Era').

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papyrus sheets which are produced from slivers of the plant's woody stem which are then pasted together, by employing the Chinese method, the cellulose fibres of plants actually mesh to form a durable and flexible 'paper'.²

The Chinese were extremely protective of their invention of the silk-making process, but not of the secret of paper making. The expanding Islamic world of the 8th century first came into contact with Chinese paper in Central Asia.

The Battle of Talas

The one and only time the Islamic and Chinese worlds -- represented by the 'Abbasid Caliphate and the Tang Dynasty respectively -- confronted each other on the battle field was in the year 751, on a remote plain alongside the Talas River (in present-day Kyrgyzstan). The resultant Muslim victory ensured a permanent Islamic presence and influence in this Turkic region of Central Asia.

One important by-product of the Battle of Talas was the capture of Chinese papermakers who gradually divulged the secret of paper-making to eager Arab entrepreneurs. From Samarqand, the Arabs carried the technology south to Baghdad, where it was further developed from an art into an industry. Unlike all other writing surfaces, paper absorbs ink, thus making the recorded words permanent and, therefore, less likely to be forged.

Baghdad papermakers invented a thicker sheet of paper that proved ideal for meeting the demands of the information explosion taking place there. By the end of the 8th century CE, the 'Abbasid capital city boasted the liveliest papermaking and book manuscript copying centre in the Islamic world. Inexpensive and readily available paper had helped create a literate society almost without rival in the history of Islam. This was a society that had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge contained in books as we know them.

² The Chinese were also the first to invent paper money in the 8th century. It was initially called 'flying money' because of its light weight. Both Marco Polo, the Venetian explorer, and Ibn Battutah, the world traveller from Tangiers, mention paper money in their *Rihlahs* (travelogues). The Mongol Ilkhans of Iran unsuccessfully attempted to introduce a Chinese-type paper currency in the late 13th century. The first paper money in the West was issued in Sweden in 1661.

Despite the popularity of the Internet, promises of the ‘paperless office’, and the latest developments in electronic book technology, paper is still an indispensable commodity in our daily lives and one rarely pauses to think of what life would be like without it.

The discovery of papermaking by the Arabs in the 8th century and the subsequent establishment of paper mills in Samarqand and Baghdad were truly momentous events in the history of mankind. It is no surprise, therefore, that Baghdad’s paper markets were the catalyst that sparked off one of the greatest ‘information explosions’ in history. The mass production of paper and its popularity enabled world civilization to evolve.

Faith develops man spiritually, but knowledge is what fosters his intellectual development. Muslims have always been encouraged to seek knowledge and Allah, Himself, equates knowledge with ‘great wealth’ in this *ayah*:

يُؤْتِي الْحِكْمَةَ مَن يَشَاءُ وَمَن يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا - البقرة: ٢٦٩

(He grants *Hikmah* [‘wisdom’, i.e., knowledge and understanding of the Qur’an and *Sunnah*] to whom He wills and he to whom *Hikmah* is granted, is indeed granted abundant good.) *Surah Al-Baqarah*: 269.

And according to Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, said:

The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds it, he has a better right to it. (*Sunan al-Tirmidhi*: 2611; *Ibn Majah*: 4159)

Baghdad, the new ‘Abbasid capital, was an impressive city in the early 9th century. It was unquestionably the most cosmopolitan city in the world -- outside of China. Only Greek Byzantium (Constantinople) could attempt to rival its riches. Scholars from east and west met in the *Bayt al-Hikmah*³ whose goal was to preserve the canon of classical Greek science in the new world language: Arabic. The city’s streets teemed with people speaking many foreign tongues: Greek, Aramaic, Persian and Indian dialects.

³ The *Bayt al-Hikmah*, or ‘House of Wisdom’, was an academy founded in Baghdad in 830 by the ‘Abbasid caliph Al-Ma’mun. Translators worked non-stop in producing Arabic versions of long lost, or forgotten, Greek scientific texts as well as works in Syriac, Pahlavi and Sanskrit.